

Von Erichs get a break

To anyone who has followed pro wrestling over the past decade, the name Von Erich and the word tragedy go almost hand in hand.

The Von Erichs were supposed to be the wrestling dynasty of the 1980s and '90s. Father Jack Adkisson, who wrestled as a post World War II German villain using the name Fritz Von Erich, was an international mat superstar from the mid-1950s until his retirement in 1982. In the late 1960s, he converted himself in the eyes of wrestling fans from his Nazi gimmick into a born-again Christian good guy in the Dallas area. He spent the next 15 years pummeling invading villains one after another. It helped of course, that he was the promoter in Dallas. And as he hit his 40s, he decided to bring his sons into the business.



**GRUNT
AND
GRIN**

BY DAVE MELTZER
FOR THE NATIONAL

Four of his sons — Kevin, David, Kerry and Mike — started wrestling as teenagers for their father. They used their father's wrestling surname of Von Erich and copied his trademark "iron claw" submission move. Of course, the sons were all pushed as the promotion's superstars and almost never lost.

By 1983, Adkisson's World Class Championship Wrestling was considered the hippest and most innovative regional promotion in the United States. And it was one of the most successful. Through Adkisson's image-manipulation, his sons were regarded as not only among the best pro wrestlers in the world, but as a classic All-American family right down to their strong religious convictions. The glory of the Von Erich family climaxed on May 6, 1984, when Kerry defeated Ric Flair to win the NWA title before 32,123 fans in Texas Stadium. The live gate of \$402,000 remains to this day the largest non-WWF gate ever in North America. At the time virtually everyone in wrestling felt Kerry, then 24, would rank with Hulk Hogan and Flair as one of the three biggest names in wrestling for at least a half-dozen more years.

But Adkisson's promotional plan had one flaw. As happens every so often in wrestling, real life crushes the best-laid plan. David died of a drug overdose in 1984 and Mike committed suicide two years later. In between, Kerry's career was nearly finished by a serious motorcycle accident. And a reputation for no-showing matches reduced Kevin from superstar status to the fringes of the business.

In the unlikely role of promoter/wrestler, Kevin, now 33, tries to keep the Von Erich name alive in Texas. But crowds to see him in a Friday night main event average less than 400 and his promotion doesn't even have a television show anymore.

Incidentally, it is because of another's tragedy that the Von Erich name has resurfaced on a national basis. On July 4, WWF headliner Brutus Beefcake suffered injuries in a para-sailing accident that may have ended his wrestling career. With his future in doubt and summer crowds the worst in recent memory, the WWF needed to create a new good-guy hero — and fast. Kerry was chosen. He took the International title from Mr. Perfect at Summer Slam and is now one of the stars in the WWF.

Chad

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